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News and Reviews

Honda challenges students to market its latest car to younger buyers

Friday, March 31, 2006

By Don Hammonds, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Honda is counting on a group of University of Pittsburgh students to size up the Fit, its all-new entry-level subcompact.

Pros in Motion, a student organization within the College of Business Administration, is developing a marketing campaign aimed at buyers just like themselves -- both on and off campus.

The students' project is part of the Honda Fit Marketing Challenge, a competition among 18 universities. Honda supplied students at each of the schools an operating budget of \$2,500.

The Fit goes on sale at the end of April, with prices starting at around \$14,500.

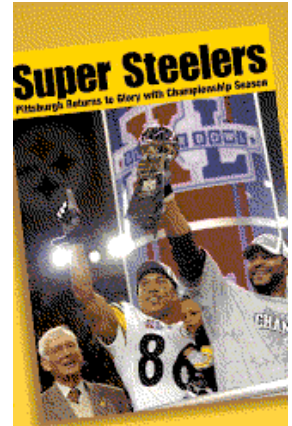
"It's a really definitely win-win-win for us," said Tom Peyton, senior manager-marketing support for Honda. "First and foremost, we love the energy and ideas that the students come up with in regard to marketing our products. There's only so many ideas in this world and taking this to the campuses is a big help with that."

The students recognize the campaign is a rare opportunity for them, too.

"It's significant for us because in class, it's a lot of theory and not a lot of practice. It's almost like having an internship because you are arguing a campaign that affects a company and the new products they are coming with," said Lindsay Livorio, a senior marketing major who is working on the public relations segment of the Fit campaign.

"And in job searching, in some of the interviews I've gone on, our campaign has been a huge topic of conversation because it's doing something that not a lot of students get to do," she added.

The students are competing for a top prize of \$5,000, a second place prize of \$3,000 and a third place prize of \$1,000. The top three teams will be flown, all-expenses paid, to Honda headquarters in Torrance, Calif., on June 1 to present their campaigns to top executives from Honda and RPA,



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Honda's advertising agency.



Teams from Honda and RPA will visit the Pitt campus on April 21 for a presentation on the campaign, and the finalists will be selected based on both quantitative factors -- such as the number of hits on Web sites, results from surveys and other items -- and qualitative factors, Ms. Livorio said. She expects to find out whether Pitt made the final cut in early May.

The sky's the limit on how the ideas generated by the students could be used by Honda, Ms. Livorio said.

"For all we know, Honda could totally love the whole campaign and use all of it, or they could use a certain part of our campaign, or perhaps a slogan. Or they could use something from our campaign and something from the other schools' campaigns, too," Ms. Livorio said. "If they like what they see when we get to California it's definitely possible it could be used in a national Fit campaign."

Regardless of the outcome of the national competition, Pros in Motion's ideas will be used for the promotion of the Fit in Pittsburgh through early May when Pitt's classes and the advertising campaign end.

"Our campaign is based solely on a new product that has not been seen here yet," said Lauren Feintuch, coordinator of Pros in Motion's project. "It's all up to us. There's nothing on television about it yet. It's just our little class that's introducing it to the school and to Pittsburgh.

"Better us to market it than some corporate person who doesn't really know us. We know what we want. Who better to market to our peers than us because we know what they want," Ms. Feintuch said.

"We also are at the age where we want new things, including new cars, not old, used ones -- and the Honda Fit is priced just right for us," said Erin Conlon, senior marketing major, who heads the public relations group of the campaign.

As part of the campaign, the students already have come up with a number of ads that will be published in the Pitt News and have been distributed as fliers in the South Side and Oakland. Each calls attention to the Bigelow Bash from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. tomorrow at the William Pitt Union, which will be the main marketing event for the car to the students.

The event will include break dancers, inflatable jousting, food and prizes for participants, including a contest to see how many people can fit into the Honda Fit in 30 seconds.

One advertisement features a kindergarten-style picture of the Fit in which color is scribbled all over the surface. The ad says, "You couldn't stay in the lines then. Why change now?" Another is a play on words for the well-known game show "The Price is Right" -- "It's a new car! Come on down!" A third calls attention to the Fit's many features and calls them a "Blueprint for fun."

In a contest handbook, Honda urges students to do something the automaker would not ordinarily do in its ad campaigns -- to push the envelope.

"Since they're looking for something different, we can do whatever we want. They're looking for people who think a little different, and that makes it easy for us," said Mike Jack, a senior marketing student who is working on the ad campaign. Other students are working on public relations, events and market research.

Regardless of how the student group finishes in the contest, the experience that they are getting is invaluable, said Bob Gilbert, an associate professor at Katz Graduate School of Management. The campaign contest is sponsored by EdVenture Partners, a company that specializes in industry-education partnerships. Shadyside Honda also is assisting.

"We're really committed to this program. It gives them real-world experience and it looks great on the resume. The research that we are doing here is first-class research and the advertising is quite well done, too," he added.

And the students are learning the ins and outs of the advertising industry. Just listen to how Ms. Feintuch, the coordinator of the project, talks about the Fit:

"First, it doesn't look like any other car out there. And it's small and very well built. And I was really surprised how many of us could actually fit into it. It's really ingenious."

Spoken like a seasoned advertising executive.

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